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Republican senator signs on to Hawaiian bill

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WASHINGTON -- Legislation recognizing Native Hawaiians is picking up Republican support on Capitol Hill, which Hawaii lawmakers say will be needed if it is to pass the U.S. Senate.

Gov. Linda Lingle announced Thursday that Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., intends to cosponsor the bill, which establishes a process for Native Hawaiians to organize and establish their own government.

"It is abundantly clear this bill is critical to the future of the indigenous Hawaiian people," Graham said in a statement. "I hope my name on the bill will encourage my colleagues to support Gov. Lingle in her quest to get this bill passed this session."

Other Republican sponsors include Sens. Norm Coleman, R-Minn., Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, Sen. Gordon Smith, R-Ore. Last year, Sens. Ted Stevens, R-Alaska, and Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, also supported the bill.

If Hatch and Stevens renew their support, it would mark the most Republican backing since the bill was proposed five years ago.

Spokesmen for Hatch and Stevens could not be reached Thursday night.

Hawaii Democratic senators Daniel Inouye and Daniel Akaka have said the 45 members of the Democratic caucus would back the bill. The caucus consists of 44 Democrats and Sen. Jim Jeffords, an independent from Vermont.

Graham signed on to the bill a week after he met with Lingle, who was in Washington last week for the National Governors Association annual meeting.

Lingle also met with Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., a critic of the bill who said this week some of his concerns had been laid to rest. Inouye and Akaka also met with the Arizona senator.

"The governor continues to work on this," Lingle spokesman Lenny Klompus said. "She's going to continue to talk to everyone who can help move the process along."

The vote counting is critical for advocates of the Hawaiian bill who will need at least 51 votes to win approval of the measure if all senators vote.

Republican leaders promised last year to make time for the Hawaiian bill before Aug. 7. Inouye said the Senate likely would tackle legislation on bankruptcy reform and Social Security before addressing the Hawaiian bill.

The Hawaiian bill establishes a process for an estimated 400,000 Native Hawaiians to organize their own government. Critics have said Congress does not have the legal authority to recognize Hawaiians as they do Native Indians or Alaska tribes.

The Bush administration has not taken a position on the bill. However, Lingle said last week she believed the president would sign the measure.

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